



Isamu Noguchi: Portrait Sculpture

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

October 6–December 6, 1989

The protean career of Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) spanned more than half a century. His achievements in works ranging from the miniature to the monumental, the visionary to the utilitarian, helped redefine the concept of sculpture for the twentieth century. For fifty years, he demonstrated that a stage set, garden, plaza, playground, interior, or even a lamp or table could be sculpture. His works, which now occupy private and public sites all over the world, are executed in a variety of styles and materials; and, whether individual pieces or ensembles, they are essentially abstract in concept. It comes as a surprise, therefore, to learn that Noguchi produced more than one hundred portrait heads between 1924 and 1950. Once we look beyond their representational character, however, we find that these portraits were conceived with a sculptural vision identical to that in his more abstract works: form follows material; the message of a Noguchi sculpture is expressed through the color, texture, weight, and grain of the particular clay, stone, or metal.

The portraits form the largest set of sculptures on a single theme within Noguchi's prodigious oeuvre. Moreover, they represent one of the longest-running interests of his career, surpassed only by landscape and theater. In fact, Noguchi treated the portrait as a combination of landscape and theater: he was concerned with both the topography of the human face and with the human drama. "Humanity is an interesting thing, after all," Noguchi said a few months before his death last year. "And it works in nuances of character and bone structure and the flesh as it flows and ages. . . . it's more than just a willful gouging and changing. One tries to find what it is in those eyes, that brow, and behind it. . . . I want to know what it is about them; what is this person? what is this face?"

Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles in 1904, the son of Yone Noguchi, an important Japanese poet, and Leonie Gilmour, an American writer, teacher, and translator. In 1922, Noguchi apprenticed to Gutzon Borglum, best known for the giant presidential portraits that he later carved out of Mount Rushmore. Borglum used Noguchi as a model rather than as an assistant, declaring that the young apprentice had no aptitude for sculpture. Undaunted, in 1923 Noguchi moved to New York and attended classes at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School. The following year, he set up his first studio and began his first portraits. The heads were modeled in clay, which was then fired to form terracotta; in some cases, Noguchi took a plaster impression from the terracotta to make



Ruth Parks, 1929

a bronze cast. These early portraits remained rather traditional in style until 1926, when Noguchi saw the exhibition of Constantin Brancusi's sculpture at the Brummer Gallery in New York. By the mid-1920s, the Rumanian-born modernist had been engaged for some time in radical experimentation with portraiture.

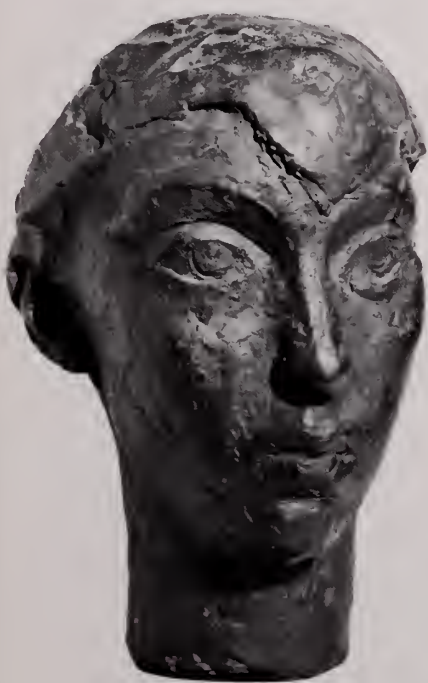
The exposure to Brancusi's work represented a challenge to the young Noguchi. Should he continue in his present conservative style, or should he venture into the exciting realm of modernism? In 1927, he applied for, and was awarded, a Guggenheim Fellowship for study in Paris and the Far East. Shortly after his arrival in Paris, he was introduced to Brancusi; for the next few months he spent part of each day serving as Brancusi's studio assistant. In Brancusi's "laboratory for distilling basic shapes," he learned to carve stone and wood, absorbing a reverence for the intrinsic properties of materials.

After leaving Brancusi's studio, Noguchi did a group of stone, wood, and sheet-metal abstractions. But when he returned to New York in 1928, he resumed producing portraits, not only to support himself but also as a way of meeting people. In his studio on the top floor of the Carnegie Hall building, he worked in clay on as many as five portraits at once and usually finished them in seven sittings, after which he made a plaster impression and then a cast from the clay model. Within a year he had completed more than two dozen heads. As a group, they were to remain his favorite portraits.

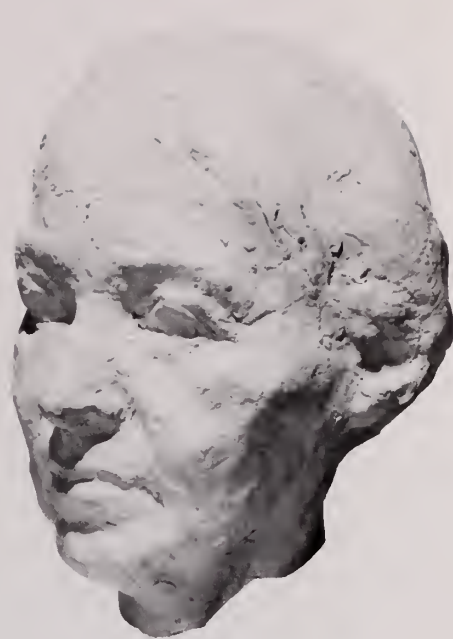
The 1929 series includes portraits of elegant,

wealthy women (Edla Frankau), colleagues and acquaintances in the arts (photographer Berenice Abbott, muralist Marion Greenwood, dancer Martha Graham, engineer and architect Buckminster Fuller, critic and patron Lincoln Kirstein), and a waitress, Ruth Parks, whose exotic beauty intrigued the sculptor. The styles in which Noguchi rendered the portraits were as varied as his sitters' physiognomies. Experimenting with a range of textures and finishes, he left some heads expressively rough, while others were distilled into streamlined shapes or were both abstracted and given highly reflective finishes of brass or chrome. When seventeen of the portraits were exhibited in Noguchi's first portrait show at the Marie Sterner Gallery in New York in February 1930, the variety of styles was much commented on by critics. One reviewer found the work "uneven and sometimes experimental" (evidently a pejorative term), deploring Noguchi's "almost too painful and self-conscious probing into the souls of his sitters." Another critic, however, praised Noguchi as "the first portrait sculptor of this century with a stylization sufficiently flexible to embrace character without loss of form." Edward Alden Jewell, writing in *The New York Times*, went so far as to say that "as a portraitist, while still true to the fundamental principles of abstraction, Noguchi can rank with the best."

The visionary ideas of Noguchi's friend Buckminster Fuller about "the total use of total technology for total population" led Noguchi to question the exclusivist premises of modern



Berenice Abbott, 1929



Leonie Gilmour, 1932

sculpture. After a 1930-31 trip to the Far East, which included eight months in China and seven months in Japan, he began a campaign to redraw the boundaries of modern sculpture so as to include the impermanent, the intangible, and the functional. The Japanese garden provided the perfect example of what Masao Hayakawa called a place "where the human heart can come into direct, pure contact with the world of plants and flowers . . . a space in which the art itself is so artless as to be totally unapparent." In this sense, Noguchi's portraits can be linked to his better-known involvement with sculptural gardens: his portraits always treated his subjects' faces as landscapes whose unique contours had to be made into art without the imposition of any preconceived ideas.

In December 1932, Noguchi had an exhibition of brush drawings, portraits, and a new aluminum sculpture at the Reinhardt Gallery. This time one reviewer saw his diversity as problematic:

There is no artist among us at present whose works differ so much from each other as do those of Noguchi. . . . Each piece of sculpture is the result of an effort to embody an idea. This is so even in his portraiture. It therefore takes courage to sit to him for it is only the most liberal and intelligent of sitters who are willing to be considered as the embodiment of an idea.

By October 1932, Noguchi's financial situation had become precarious. He had been

evicted from his studio and was working in an unheated storefront on East 76th Street. Noguchi and Buckminster Fuller camped out in various acquaintances' apartments, and at one point Noguchi shared an apartment with entrepreneur Sidney Spivak and his friend Paul Nitze. Noguchi sculpted Nitze's portrait at this time, as he did that of Dorothy Dillon, who would later marry Spivak. He also carved a portrait of publicist Eleanor Lambert, who had been promoting his work to the press for two years. She persuaded several of her friends to sit for portraits at \$150 each in order to help Noguchi survive. Her friends, in turn, persuaded others, and over the next two years an interesting group of portraits resulted, many of them carved directly in hardwoods in six or seven sittings.

The Eleanor Lambert head presents a strong, fine-boned face with a serious, almost wistful expression. Poised delicately on the front edge of the neck, it has an active air, as though Lambert were eagerly moving forward to the next task at hand. The powerful *lignum vitae* head of artist Beatrice Grover is defined by facets and planes that emphasize the sitter's broad brow, prominent cheekbones, and strong jawline. In different lights the portrait assumes expressions ranging from supreme self-confidence to pensive withdrawal.

In 1933, Noguchi began to carve in stone as well as wood. Several of his Paris abstractions had been in stone, but he had done nothing more in that medium until he executed the pristine, elegant portrait of Clare Boothe Luce.



Martha Graham, 1929

By this time, he had begun to acquire a reputation as a portraitist. Among the people he would sculpt within the next two years were writer Thornton Wilder, Museum of Modern Art president A. Conger Goodyear, and actresses Miriam Hopkins and Helen Gahagan Douglas. With recognition came the first full-length article on his work in all genres. Published in 1933, it was written by gallery owner Julien Levy, whom Noguchi had portrayed in 1929. Levy found the portraits

forceful and precise, and the likeness unmistakable. At the same time, each was an object of plastic importance in itself. . . . Noguchi was discovering a means of applying the formal elements of sculpture to enhance the psychological implications of a portrait. Everything, from the general outline to the most minute details of texture, was significant of his estimate of his subject. The choice of material, determination of scale, even the shape of the base, all were part of the general consideration so that, if the portrait were featureless, there should still remain a sort of impression of the subject.

In 1937, Noguchi worked on several bronze portraits of men and a small group of stone portraits of women, among them Margaret La Farge Osborn and actresses Aline MacMahon and Lillian Gish. In these sculptures the diversity of his earlier approach to style began to be replaced by a uniform elegance: men and women alike were given long necks, smooth heads, and blank features. Rough textures and



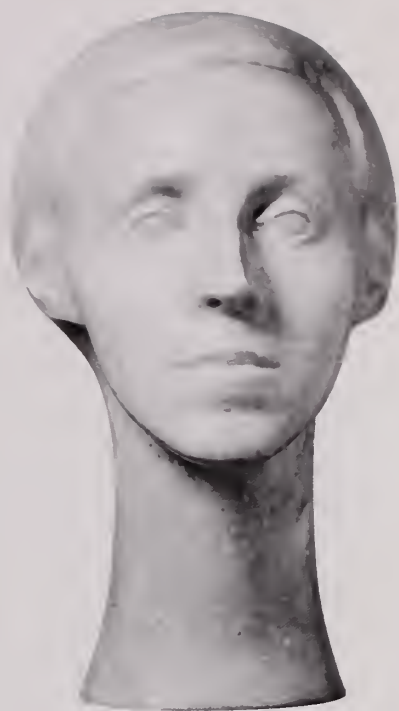
George Gershwin, 1929

carved planes gave way to streamlined surfaces, as though Noguchi were seeking to standardize the human head for mass production. (In 1937 he actually did design a mass-produced object that looks very much like a human head: *Radio Nurse*, an intercom made of bakelite, which was manufactured by the Zenith Radio Company.)

By 1940, Noguchi's interests had moved away from portraiture. He had been making objects and reliefs for architectural sites and designs for furniture, the stage, and playground equipment. In 1941, however, while in Los Angeles, Noguchi executed a small group of portraits, among them a clay study of Ginger Rogers, which he later carved in marble and sent to her.

When Noguchi returned to New York in late 1942, he immersed himself in abstraction, creating the stone slab constructions that are among his best-known works. His postwar portraits lacked the elegance of the heads from the late 1930s, the massiveness of those from earlier in the decade, the exuberance of the 1929 portraits, or the experimental quality of those first works of 1924-27. Perhaps Noguchi's thoroughgoing involvement with abstraction had left him unable to size up his subjects with the same instantly discerning eye.

Noguchi's self-expressed goal—to create sculpture that reflects “the occupation of man with matter and space”—was first realized in his portraits. He always treated the human head as a piece of nature, a landscape with unique configurations that had to be respected even as they were transformed into art. This approach



Margaret La Farge Osborn, 1937

is what gives his portraits their extraordinary individuality. His sense of theater and enthusiasm for materials endowed them with an amazing variety of colors and textures, while his acute eye for human significance makes them, collectively, a poetic meditation on humanity. “My effort to find nature is through portraiture. The nature of the person; the nature of the personality, the reality of the person as expressed through his face. It could not be done through an abstraction.”

Noguchi's more than one hundred portraits constitute an important historical body of work, one which has not been recognized as such or evaluated until now. Some of the portraits have not been exhibited for more than forty years; others have never been shown; and they have never been seen or discussed together. With this exhibition, Noguchi is finally revealed as a major American portrait sculptor with a uniquely flexible and sensitive, yet modernist, approach to the human face. As he begins to be included in histories of design, earthworks, and landscape architecture, so he must now take his place as an important modern portraitist, and our sense of the scope and scale of his work must grow accordingly.



Aline MacMahon, 1937

This essay was adapted from “‘What Is This Face?': The Portraits of Isamu Noguchi” by Nancy Grove, published in *Isamu Noguchi: Portrait Sculpture*, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches and exclude the base; height precedes width precedes depth.

Cecil Boulton, 1925

Terracotta, $10 \times 7 \times 6$

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Majdrakoff and Thomas Majdrakoff

Michio Ito, 1925-26

Bronze, $18 \times 5\frac{3}{4} \times 4$

Estate of the artist

Boris Ivan Majdrakoff (M.I. Boris), 1925-26

Bronze, $14\frac{1}{2} \times 8 \times 7\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Majdrakoff and Thomas Majdrakoff

Berenice Abbott, 1929

Bronze, $13\frac{3}{4} \times 9 \times 10$

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Edla Frankau, 1929

Bronze with brass finish, $15\frac{1}{2} \times 8 \times 10$

Collection of Edla Frankau Cusick

R. Buckminster Fuller, 1929

Chrome-plated bronze, $13 \times 8 \times 10$

Buckminster Fuller Institute, Los Angeles

George Gershwin, 1929

Bronze, $14\frac{5}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Mrs. Arthur Gershwin

Martha Graham, 1929

Bronze, $14 \times 6 \times 9\frac{3}{4}$

Honolulu Academy of Arts; Gift of Mrs. Charles M. Cooke

Marion Greenwood, 1929

Cast iron, $16\frac{1}{2} \times 8 \times 10$

Estate of the artist

Lincoln Kirstein, 1929

Bronze, $15 \times 10 \times 10$

School of American Ballet, Inc., New York

Beatrice Locher, 1929

Chrome-plated bronze, $13 \times 10 \times 7$

Private collection

Ruth Parks, 1929

Bronze, $16\frac{3}{4} \times 7 \times 10\frac{1}{2}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 31.58

Angna Enters, 1931 (cast 1932)

Bronze with black patina, $11 \times 6\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Morris K. Jessup Fund

Dorothy Dillon, 1932

Bronze, $21\frac{1}{2} \times 11 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Dorothy Eweson

Leonie Gilmour, 1932

Terracotta, $9\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Ailes Gilmour Spinden

Eleanor Lambert, 1932

Wood, $14\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{3}{4} \times 9\frac{1}{4}$

Collection of Eleanor and William Berkson

J.B. Neumann, 1932

Bronze, $12 \times 9 \times 10$

Collection of Peter Gabriel Neumann

Paul Nitze, 1932

Bronze, $12\frac{1}{2} \times 8 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Paul H. Nitze

Suzanne Ziegler, 1932

Whitewashed wood, $14\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$

Collection of Suzanne Z. Gleaves

Clare Boothe Luce, 1933

Marble, $14 \times 9\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$

The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., New York

Beatrice Grover, 1934

Lignum vitae, $20\frac{1}{2} \times 7 \times 11$

Collection of Mrs. Allen Grover

Michael Hopkins, 1934

Tennessee marble, $8\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{3}{4} \times 7$

Collection of Christiane and

Michael Hopkins

Immo Gulden, c. 1934

Stainless steel, $12 \times 8\frac{3}{4} \times 9$

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul I.

Gulden, Jr.

Helen Gahagan Douglas, 1935

Botticino marble, $15 \times 12\frac{1}{4} \times 13\frac{1}{4}$

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian

Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of

Melvyn Douglas

Aline MacMahon, 1937

Botticino marble, $14 \times 8 \times 11$

The New York Public Library at Lincoln

Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden

Foundations, Billy Rose Theatre

Collection; Gift of Aline MacMahon

Margaret La Farge Osborn, 1937

Tennessee marble, $19 \times 7 \times 9$

Collection of Bayard Osborn

Sono Osato, 1940

Plaster, $13\frac{1}{4} \times 7 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Sono Osato-Elmaleh

Ginger Rogers, 1942

Georgia marble, $14\frac{3}{4} \times 9 \times 10$

Collection of Ginger Rogers

Front Cover:

Clare Boothe Luce, 1933

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Gallery Hours

Monday-Saturday, 11:00 am-6:00 pm
Thursday, 11:00 am-7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday-Saturday, 7:30 am-9:30 pm
Sunday, 11:00 am-7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 12:30 pm
Tours by appointment
For more information, call (212) 878-2453

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